Designing Museum Experiences

Reviewed by Sara DeAngelis

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How could reframing the focus of museum work to put the audience at the center of our thinking impact the planning of experiences? Based on *Designing Museum Experiences*, it would change everything. The book's rationale and many tools are a helpful introduction for students, emergent museum professionals (EMPs), startup museums, or organizations simply looking to reflect on their relationship with their audiences. Much of the book's advice applies to exhibition or experience creation, but its suggestions are relevant broadly to general operations. Those individuals whose interest is piqued by the topics it introduces can then explore the resources at the end of each chapter or take advantage of the companion online "Museum Toolbox" for further reading, which is accessible to purchasers of the book.

The book's author, Mark Walhimer, is a museum planning consultant and part-time professor, and *Designing Museum Experiences* was inspired by a seemingly simple question from one of his students: "How do you create an experience?" In this significantly illustrated volume, Walhimer has put together an introduction to practices in user-centered design. He champions understanding our audiences and keeping them central during the planning process. Drawing upon the work of well-known museum practitioners, he introduces readers to a range of planning practices from online design, technology, and other experience-creating sectors – reminding us that our work is not for the staff or the designer but

our audience. I appreciated the author's approach of looking broadly for best practices that can enrich experiences and support creative planning.

The book has five parts: "Shifting to the Visitor (Why)"; "The Museum Visitor (Who)"; "Supporting the Museum Visitor Experience (How)"; "Future Museum Visitor Experiences (When)"; and "Visitor Experience Toolbox." Each of the first four parts includes two to five chapters; the fifth part features a robust list of resources, a bibliography, and a glossary. The book encourages readers to think about visitors in rich and nuanced ways and draw upon those tools and models that resonate with their planning approach. Each chapter includes key concepts, terminology, and additional resources. In addition, there are templates, diagrams, and an expanded toolkit in the book's final section. In several chapters, concrete suggestions for exercises or activities are discussed or provided for teams. These certainly helped facilitate a greater understanding of topics like the use of journey mapping or design thinking.

The first part, "Shifting to the Visitor (Why)," focuses on the essential paradigm shift that underlies the author's key premise – that museums must shift how they think about audiences in a changing and competitive marketplace, at least if they want to thrive in the future. Several themes that may be familiar within the museum studies literature, including focusing on the audience, co-creation, place-making, and a shift toward storytelling or narrative in

experience planning, are touched upon in these sections. Here, the chapters include several compelling case studies that draw upon the author's international work and travels. The art island of Naoshima in Japan is one example that I personally found inspiring. The author vividly relates his visit to the island, including the surprising craft of the art-house installations and the perceptual change he experienced from the 30-minute walk between each location.

In the second part of the book, "The Museum Visitor (Who)," Walhimer draws on diverse sources to introduces readers to global product-design groups – like IDEO – that use human- centered design to solve complex problems, from the design of computer mice to designing waste out of food systems. He touches on techniques used in digital development (Web and mobile) and user experience/user interfaces (UX/UI). These user-centered disciplines employ the creation of personas, constructing emotional/visitor journeys, and development of performance indicators. The volume sometimes provides detailed information about how each concept may be applied within museums or experience creation. However, readers receive only a paragraph or two of introduction for other topics, such as the importance of diversity, ability, and prototyping. The author seems to assume that readers interested in applying these approaches will do a more thorough investigation of subjects using the resources at the end of each chapter. In that respect, this book is less like a "how-to" and more like a primer, introducing a basic lexicon and ideas rather than selecting a few and dealing with them in more depth.

The third part of the book, "Future Museum Visitor Experiences (When)," focuses on supporting museum visitors' experience drawing from the fields of place-making, data-driven audience research, and guest experience. These topics round out the book's premise by encouraging readers to think beyond the museum's walls and consider the nature of the museum experiences holistically. However, unlike some chapters in earlier sections of the book, chapters in the third
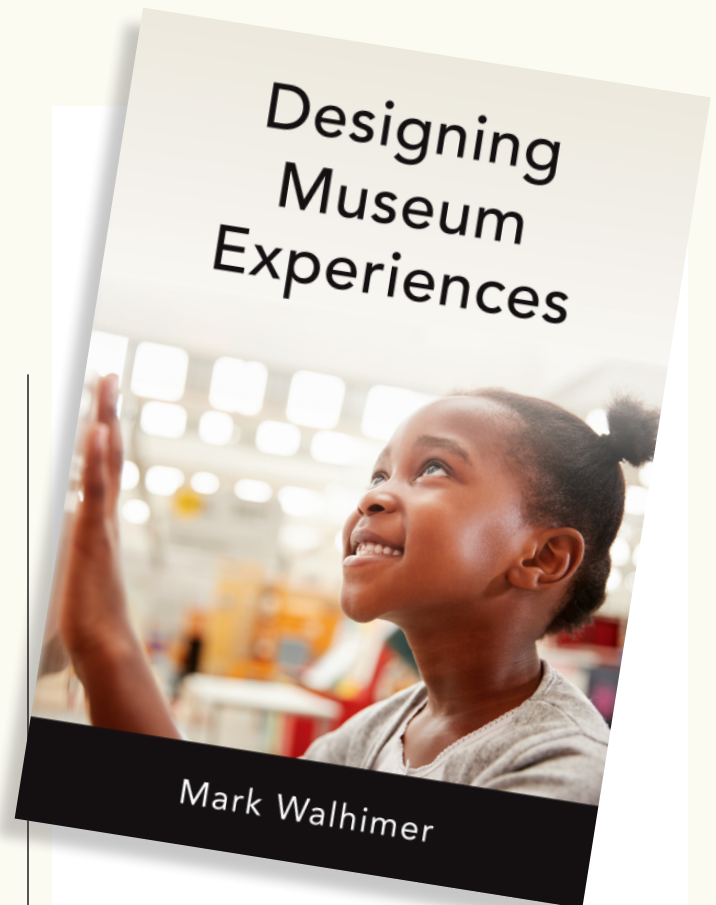
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part lack the range of case studies and share fewer examples from the author's work. Instead, this section seems to rely more on the literature and research to make its points than the author's experience. There are nuggets of good advice throughout, but this section feels less fully integrated into the book's overall argument than I would have expected, given the importance of the topics covered.

The final two parts, "Future Museum Visitor Experiences (When)," and "Visitor Experience Toolbox," address the future of museum visitor experiences. These sections touch upon emerging technologies and what the author characterizes as the museum digital revolution. Walhimer argues that to attract Generation Z (individuals born after 1996 and through the early 2010s), museums should include personalized content,

calls to action, social media, and multidimensional exhibitions that appeal to digital natives. As most museum professionals have witnessed, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted how museums use and think about technology. Many organizations are thinking more strategically and holistically about their digital exhibitions and the potential range of online experience creation. Over the past two years, many nuanced and thoughtful conversations have happened on this very topic. I would have loved to have seen details or insights on the range of ways organizations can become nimbler by leveraging a well-crafted digital strategy and new technologies. The chapter explores three scenarios for how, in the United States, political, economic, as well as museum worker inequities may shape the future of museums. The author encourages readers to do their own "blue-sky" future casting, and shares his vision for a model museum that belongs to and is cherished by its audiences.

Designing Museum Experiences does provide a good introduction to many useful topics; however, readers may feel the need to explore further for themselves using the toolbox, references, and citations to implement suggested practices in their organizations. Certain topics throughout the book – for example, educational psychology, behavioral change, system thinking, and digital strategies – would have benefited from more elaboration, the inclusion of specific examples or case studies, and richer end-of-chapter resources or references.

As an exhibition developer who is a longtime advocate of looking at models of practice outside the museum field for inspiration, I looked forward to reading more about how the author would treat many of these topics. I would have loved to have seen more detail about the thinking behind some of the practices discussed and more examples of organizations or specific projects where museums applied specific techniques.

The Museum Toolkit and online resources are valuable; however, readers may need to explore further before they feel confident in applying the worksheets and suggested activities provided in the book alone. For exhibition planners, a deeper discussion with more concrete illustrations of the tools and their applications would have given richness and nuance to individuals seeking to put the approaches discussed directly into practice. For example, how can readers work to shift institutional culture and positively impact the systems currently used in experience planning? Unfortunately, this book doesn't address the strategies readers might use to gain institutional buy-in for the ideas it introduces.

Designing Museum Experiences aims to shift our professional framework to consider the entire ecosystem of the visitor experience. It encourages museum staff to keep our relationship with visitors central to all our thinking in experience creation, and to me this is an essential mindset for all exhibition planners. The book also encourages planners to look broadly at the range of tools, across disciplines, that could be leveraged to help support the work of exhibition creation. I think that students, emergent museum professionals, startup museums, or those looking for ways to reinvigorate their practices and connect more deeply to their audiences may find this book a helpful introduction. ∎

1   "The generations defined," Pew Research Center, May 24, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/gen-z-millennials-stand-out-for-climate-change-activism-social-media-engagement-with-issue/.